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Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Welcome, everyone, to the 103rd meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

We are on the second of three sessions on the human rights situation in Turkey. We have two witnesses before us today. From the Stockholm Center for Freedom, we have Abdullah Bozkurt, who is the President. We also have Arzu Yildiz, an Independent Journalist and Court Reporter.

We'll get straight into testimony. You'll each have 10 minutes to deliver your remarks, after which we'll open it up to members of the committee to ask you some questions.

If we could begin with Abdullah Bozkurt, that would be great, and then we'll move to the second witness.

Thank you very much. Please, proceed.

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt (President, Headquarters, Stockholm Center for Freedom): Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for this important and timely hearing. It is a timely discussion and certainly an important and very valuable one with respect to Turkey.

The crackdown on human rights, freedoms, and liberties in Turkey under the current regime of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been so severe that no parallel can be found in the modern history of the Turkish republic. It even dwarfs the rights violations during the military era, when martial law and emergency rule were applied. The number of jailed people, most on dubious charges and with little or no evidence at all, in the last one and a half years shows the severity of the crackdown on rights and freedom across all segments of society in Turkey, which is a NATO ally country, a European Union candidate country, and also a full member of the Council of Europe and of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

As of today, the most recent figures documented by our centre in Sweden—the Stockholm Center for Freedom, which was set up by exiled Turkish journalists—show that we have 256 journalists and media workers behind bars as of April 11, 2018. Of those imprisoned journalists, 197 were under arrest pending trial, while 58 journalists have been convicted on abusive anti-terror laws, defamation charges, or coup plotting charges with no legal evidence at all and are serving their time. Detention warrants against 140 journalists, including me and many others, are still outstanding, in addition to the 256 who are already in jail. If the Turkish government somehow manages to get its hands on these additional 140 journalists, the numbers will be quite staggering, and more than 256.

Turkey has suspended or dismissed more than 150,000 judges, prosecutors, doctors, teachers, academics, police, and other civil servants since July 2016, when we saw a failed coup attempt. According to Turkish government figures that were announced yesterday, 77,081 people have been arrested since then over alleged links to the Gülen movement, a civic group inspired by the U.S.-based Turkish Muslim intellectual Fethullah Gülen, which has unquestionably borne the brunt of this crackdown since even before the failed coup attempt. Around 170,000 people have been subject to legal proceedings, which in most cases means they have been detained. A third of them were formally arrested, and others have been released pending trial and charges. It is estimated that half a million people who are either alleged to have or have real links to the Gülen movement are awaiting their turn, and the authorities are simply taking their time to reshuffle them through the criminal justice system.

The rule of law has effectively ceased to exist, and the protections of due process and a speedy and fair trial have been completely suspended. Detainees' access to a lawyer and their right to a defence have been severely restricted under the emergency rule. As of today, 1,539 Turkish lawyers have been prosecuted on criminal charges and 580 have been jailed, including over 100 who were convicted on trumped-up charges. My journalist colleagues back in Turkey are having a hard time finding and hiring lawyers to represent their cases because most lawyers don't want to end up in prison like many others, so they are not taking the cases of critical and independent opposition journalists. In some cases, we have seen lawyers charging quite a high fee and taking advantage of the situation.

● (1310)

Almost one-third of the judges and the prosecutors in Turkey have either been dismissed or jailed. We are talking about over 4,000 people here, and that includes two members of the Constitutional Court, and many senior members of the Supreme Court of Appeals and the top administrative court, the Council of State, in Turkey. Again, they were accused of very vaguely defined, very broad anti-terror charges, or coup-plotting charges.

One-third of all Turkish diplomats, about 500 Turkish diplomats, were also declared terrorists by the Government of Turkey overnight. Some of them are jailed, and some of them fled Turkey and are seeking asylum in other countries. Among them is the former Turkish ambassador who served in Canada, Tuncay Babali, a top-notch Turkish diplomat, whose credentials everybody recognized, as well as Gürcan Balik, an ambassador who served as a chief adviser to the former Turkish president Abdullah Gül and former prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu. He is still behind bars.

Contrary to the Turkish government claims of compliance with zero tolerance of torture, we have so many cases in prison and detention centres where the people and the detainees were tortured, abused, and faced abusive and ill treatment. These are well documented in many cases by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which actually issued a recent report to that effect, as well as other monitoring bodies. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other respected human rights advocacy groups also documented these cases. Unfortunately, we have been calling on the Turkish government for some time, as have many others, to release another report, done by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, or CPT, of the Council of Europe. It requires that the Turkish government approve it for the findings to be released to the public. So far, the Turkish government has not done so.

Cases of arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, and suspicious death in detentions and prisons have been on the rise in clear breach of the Turkish government's international obligations under rights conventions, and most specifically with regard to the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, or ICCPR. Mass numbers of civil servants, simply by government decrees, without any individual reasoning to justify their dismissal, and certainly without any administrative or judicial investigation, were dismissed from their jobs. This again contradicts the convention that Turkey signed with the International Labour Organization.

Freedom of assembly, freedom of association, the right to free enterprise, as well as other rights have also been under crackdown in Turkey. Using the failed coup as a pretext, the Turkish government shut down 19 unions, almost 1,500 associations and foundations, over 1,000 schools, education, and tutoring centres, 35 hospitals, and 15 universities on alleged links to the Gülen movement. Their assets were seized and transferred to the government. Most of the nation's best-performing science schools, which won so many awards in the international science Olympiad competitions, were also seized. They were transferred to different NGOs, Islamist NGOs, or they were turned into religious public schools, which are a breeding ground for a young Islamist generation that will keep supporting the current Islamist Justice and Development Party in Turkey.

The crackdown also includes the opposition lawyers. There are so many behind bars, especially from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, as well as one from the main opposition Republican People's Party. He is a former journalist, Enis Berberoglu, who is behind bars on completely trumped-up charges.

● (1315)

The question is why the Erdogan government has rolled back the accomplishments that we as the Turkish people have fought so hard to achieve over the decades. What is the objective of this crackdown? When will it end?

I think the answer lies within the caliphate-like vision of the Erdogan government, which wants to create a new Turkey in the image of the president himself, which is not a pretty picture at all. It is based on a dangerous mixture of nationalist euphoria and religious zealotry, which often manifests itself as a xenophobic and anti-western narrative, which we often hear from President Erdogan personally and many other senior officials of the Turkish government. Those who do not toe the line or stick to the official narrative of the Turkish government are branded as terrorists, traitors, and unpatriotic people, and in many cases they face criminal investigations on trumped-up charges.

I think with these mass purges, Erdogan has created a huge vacuum in the Turkish state institutions to fill with the new guys coming from Islamist backgrounds, or now nationalist backgrounds, not based on merit or qualifications but rather based on how they're committed to the ideological zealotry that was propagated by the government. The newly hired government employees did not even go through required training at all to be able to qualify, a pattern that spells troubles, especially for critical state institutions such as police forces, judiciary, foreign service, intelligence, and military. In many cases we have seen the lawyers, actually, who were working for the ruling party, for Erdogan's party, turned into judges and prosecutors in a very short period of time. You can imagine what kinds of judgments they will be rendering in the future because they started with the political party in different posts before.

It is clear that the Erdogan government could not achieve this major transformation in Turkey if it played according to established rules and procedures in compliance with either the Turkish Constitution or the international conventions of which Turkey is a party. Human rights violations are also part of a systematic and deliberate policy of the Turkish government to intimidate critics, opponents, and others, independent people. It is part of the breaking down of the resistance against this dangerous transformation that we see in our NATO-allied Turkey.

The publication of the photos, for example, right after the failed coup attempt clearly showed that all the detainees had been beaten, some of them very senior generals, and the state news agency was publishing these pictures to send a chilling message across the board to intimidate other people who might try to challenge the government, either with their writings or with their speeches.

The Chair: Mr. Bozkurt, if I could maybe get you to wrap up in the next minute or so, then we'll obviously get back to you with questions. I just want to make sure we leave time for the other witness as well.

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: Sure, Mr. Chair. I will wrap it up in a minute.

The crackdown also includes social media and the Internet, unfortunately the only venues left for many to express themselves, criticize the government on many issues, or speak up. The government is going after these outlets as well. They are reasserting. They are asking the courts to issue judgments to block the Internet or censor Twitter, YouTube, or Facebook messages. You can see from Twitter's last transparency report that it showed almost 91% of the court judgments across the world came from only one country: Turkey. You can imagine what kind of judiciary we have in Turkey. They ask for a judgment in the morning and they get it right away, and you get blocked by Twitter, Facebook, and Internet portals. There are so many people who are investigated, 10,000 people, because of posting on social media, and the crackdown is also happening on that platform.

I will stop here, and I welcome any questions you may raise.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

● (1320)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will move straight on to Ms. Yildiz, please.

Ms. Arzu Yildiz (Independent Journalist and Court Reporter, As an Individual): First of all, I want to thank you for inviting me to this panel.

I wanted to be there with you, but unfortunately, it was a bit late to be there when I heard about this panel. That's why I am using video conference.

Let me introduce myself briefly. I am a journalist with 15 years of experience. I spent 15 years in an independent media organization. In the last nine years, I was a courthouse and police reporter. I also spent those nine years publishing news about corruption, unsolved murders against the Kurdish people, and the Turkish intelligence agency, which sent people to Syria illegally.

I am the only journalist who wrote about it and followed all of the processes. By the way, prosecutors and soldiers of this case are sitting in a jail, and I am the only journalist who cares about them.

I was sentenced to three years just because I wrote about them, and the government took guardianship of my children. On July 15, 2016, I shared my opinion on social media about the coup and the police torture of the jailed soldiers. Then I became the first journalist to face the detention decision. After two days, on July 17, police showed up at my house and tried to arrest, with me were my seven-month-old and seven-year-old daughters. After the corruption investigation, which included Erdogan and his family and many of his ministers, there was no justice in Turkey.

After the coup, it was completely dead. That was why I refused to surrender to the cops and lived for about five months like an outlaw. It was like hell, and I don't know how many times I died in that period. It was very hard and my future was uncertain. My only option was to leave the country illegally. If I made it, I was going to be free and if I didn't, I was going to be a prisoner just like my other journalist friends.

Luckily, I was able to make it, but I could not take my children with me. Afterwards, I entered Canada illegally and I have been here for 14 months. My youngest doesn't even recognize me anymore. I learned so many things in this period. I left Turkey as a Turkish mother of two, but now I feel like every single child's mother who is left to be alone, for example, Karim, who lost his entire family and his eye in Syria. It's the same for the ones after the genocide in Sri Lanka. I don't identify myself as Turkish. I am just human now.

I am against anything that others people, like religion, ethnicity, ideology, language, etc. People understand each other but politicians separate us. I have seen many lives and deaths. I nearly died and had losses, but I want to speak specifically about Turkey here.

Tons of people are jailed now. According to authorities, 650,000 people have legal processes against them. Thousands of people were fired. About 700 babies are in jail with their mothers. Many journalists are in jail, as well as doctors, police, prosecutors, judges, academics, as Abdullah Bozkurt said. They even arrest lawyers just because they take the cases. They torture them in the jails. More than 80 people have died in there. They don't even let your *[Inaudible-Editor]* in the prison.

● (1325)

They arrested 3,000 judges and prosecutors just in one day. Now they are able to...some of the non-governmental organizations, TV and radio channels, and newspapers. There is no justice and freedom of the press in Turkey. Sometimes they don't let you go even if you have your eviction, such as many journalists, academic and author Mehmet Altan, or chairman of Amnesty International Turkey, Taner Kilic.

Turkey arrested judges who were ordered to be expelled and dismissed from the profession. There are no human rights in Turkey. Civil rights activists from all around the world mention it. You and other people may be interested in my words, but the politicians are mostly interested in their own benefits. For example, a French journalist was accused by Erdogan in France, just because he did not like the question. The French leader, Macron, instead of doing something, made a cattle deal with him. Erdogan's bodyguards thrashed protesters but he bought airplanes, estimated at a cost of $11 billion, and the United States did nothing.

The European Court of Human Rights doesn't take any action against this situation and is keeping it out of their agenda. Media organizations of Erdogan carry the role of a hitman. They commit genocide against the Kurdish, like Hitler against the Jews. They are making a witch hunt like McCarthy did. There is the same fear as the Red Scare in the period of McCarthy. Thousands of people share the same role with Sacco and Vanzetti. We are under persecution just because we demand freedom of speech.

They condemn this but it is not enough. They publish reports and then do nothing. If you want to complain, start with your own leaders. If they don't speak against Erdogan, they are the part of this crime that is against human rights. Why is the European Court of Human Rights not responding to their colleagues' plight?

I want to remind you that Ahmet Altan is also known as editor-in-chief of *Taraf* newspaper, where I used to work. He and his brother, Mehmet Altan, have been sitting in jail since September 2016, sentenced for life. Their father, Cetin Altan, was jailed when he was 70 years old, and the reason was that he said [*Inaudible—Editor*]. Nevertheless, he told his son to bite the bullet and say what he had to say if he had to.

Ahmet Altan once said during his trial that the rule of law was worse than hell, that today the system crawls around holding people in Turkey. "Oh Judge, I am ready to die and I don't have any fear, but are you?"

On the other hand, Mehmet Altan asked an important question: "Do you want to be judged by a judge like you?"

Now, I am asking you, don't you smell the same stench, which crawls around the world? Some people are sleeping in cells away from their families for nothing. It is not a bad country or imaginary [*Inaudible—Editor*]. We're the people [*Inaudible—Editor*] for anybody from anywhere: Turkey, Europe, Syria. It doesn't matter. If there is unrighteousness anywhere in the world, we shall stand against it. If a politician legitimatizes a dictator, we have to condemn him or her. Human rights cannot be disregarded for a cattle deal. Europe is still silent for Syrian refugees.

● (1330)

This is not a dramatic movie. Their lives are as real as yours. We cannot be partners of this crime. It has worked for losing everything. We cannot sleep if we see the faces of the innocent.

I don't fear dying. I died before many times, but also I loved life every time after I died. When you go through your worst nightmares, you will find out how much you love life. Don't be pardoned just for your kids. Ask yourself first if you can ever belong to any other kids.

Did you know that the dog that found the weapons that went to Syria from Turkey was exiled—even the dog? That's a dog with dignity. We must be better than a dog.

Unfortunately, some people will sit and be quiet, and dismiss. They don't even share the dignity of a dog.

Thank you for listening to me.

The Chair: Thank you very much to both of you for your testimony.

We're going to move straight into questions from members.

We're going to begin with MP Anderson, please.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here and giving us this information.

I would like to ask both of you what the role is of the media in Turkey right now. I think, Ms. Yildiz, you have written that basically there isn't one, but can you give me a little glimpse of whether the regular media and the long-term media still have a role to play? Then what is the role of social media and some of the newer forms of media in Turkey today?

It doesn't matter who goes first. I only have seven minutes, so we will have a very short period of time.

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: I will take first crack, Mr. Anderson. The traditional media, as we know, is completely decimated in Turkey. On the print side, it is almost 100%. There maybe a few small dailies left on the left side. They have very limited reach to the audience in Turkey. Pretty much by and large it is controlled by Erdogan or his people directly.

On the broadcast side, it is the same situation, maybe much worse than the print side because most of the Turkish people get their news from the TV networks rather than reading the newspapers. That's why Erdogan paid specific attention to consolidating his power base on the TV network initially. That's why the only outlet left for many to get their information is the Internet, social media.

However, as I said in my introductory remarks, the government is also cracking down. Because it owns the backbone systems, it can easily suffocate the lines. We saw it played out during the election, actually, that we still had some independent and critical media in Turkey while I was still there.

If you set up a critical news website, it gets blocked automatically by the Turkish government. You may set it up in the States, Canada, or Sweden, but you cannot reach the audience in Turkey unless they use VPN to bypass the systems.

The government is using the criminal justice system to level charges against so many, not just journalists by the way but average citizens who may dare to criticize the government on any issue. They may get rounded up and spend some time in detention. In some cases, they may get formally arrested.

As of the end of 2016, the numbers we have are that more than 10,000 people face defamation charges for insulting the Turkish president or other senior officials. In some cases, it even extends to insulting the first lady and other members of Erdogan's family, who are not protected by the law at all. We see the government is inventing new laws that have no basis in the books at all, so it's quite arbitrary.

● (1335)

Mr. David Anderson: Can I interrupt you there? The president has called for snap elections and then reimposed the state of emergency for another three months. What will the role of the media be able to be during that election campaign? Are they going to be neutralized?

Tell us a bit about that, if you would.

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: Under the emergency rule, the main motivation on the part of Erdogan is not to crack down on the media, which he has done already. He's really going after the town hall meetings and the rallies during the election campaign period. Under the emergency rule, even the local government or the district government can ban any meetings or assemblies if it sees some kind of justification based on the national security threat, which nobody will be challenging. That's why he wants to go to snap polls under the emergency powers. The opposition parties will not be able to hold election rallies or protest rallies. In many cases, they may cite a terror threat of some other excuse just to shut up the town hall meetings. That's the main purpose.

Mr. David Anderson: I'm sure there will be some sort of terrorist threat. It seems to be a fairly routine method that they use to try to suppress dissent.

I'd like to give my colleague Mr. Chong an opportunity to take a little bit of my time here.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you for your testimony. I weep for your situation. Turkey is a beautiful country. My wife and I spent our honeymoon there many years ago, and we have many fond memories of going throughout the country.

One thing I'm interested in hearing from you is regarding the fact that yesterday the president announced a snap election, as Mr. Anderson has noted. I'm wondering how popular President Erdogan's party is. When I was travelling through rural Turkey, through Konya and the Cappadocia region with my wife some 15 or 20 years ago, it was quite clear that it was a very conservative part of the country. I've always wondered how deep and broad his popularity is today as he heads into this election.

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: If the president is speaking once, twice, or even three times a day and all his speeches are televised live on maybe 18 different channels, and the next day you'll see his remarks in the headlines of the stories from almost all the newspapers, you can imagine his popularity. His narrative is the only one going around. There's no challenging narrative that people hear and no independent, critical, or opposition media coverage at all.

The situation is quite dramatically different from what we saw maybe five or six years ago in Turkey, when we still had vibrant media, despite all the challenges and the shortcomings, and people could hear different voices and different points of view. Now they're only hearing one voice. Whatever the president says is taken at face value as a fact, and the people believe it. He's framing the election campaign as a sort of liberation war for Turkey, because in his narrative Turkey is under attack even from NATO allies, including the United States and Canada. They're trying their best to liberate the country from these "alien" or "imperialist" powers.

Hon. Michael Chong: Could you quickly tell us why you think he called a snap election yesterday rather than wait out the term?

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: There are various reasons.

Number one is the economy. There is a worsening outlook for the economy. The numbers speak for themselves. I think he wanted a pre-emptive strike. Before things get worse, he wanted to go to an early election.

The second reason is that he wanted to catch the opposition off guard, especially the underdog that was set up recently by a former nationalist politician who is very popular. He didn't want to give a chance to her party and other opposition parties to make alliances for the presidential and the national elections.

The third reason is that he's going to be running the election right after the wrapping up of the Muslim holy month, Ramadan, which will be very important for many people in Turkey. Religious sensitivity will be peaking and he's going to be running the election right after. He's going to be campaigning mainly on religious issues as well as nationalist issues. It will be a perfect opportunity for him to make inroads into the undecided workers bloc.

● (1340)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go straight to MP Sgro, please.

Hon. Judy A. Sgro (Humber River—Black Creek, Lib.): Thank you very much for being here, and to both of you, clearly there is a love for Turkey, for your dear country, here in Canada as well.

We are most disappointed with what has happened. I, for one, was very proud of what Turkey was doing in its democratization, and of the millions of refugees who Turkey befriended and looked after, and provided schooling to and all of the rest of it. I was terribly disappointed when all of this happened, and with the complete erosion of democracy, as far as I am concerned, there isn't democracy any further in Turkey.

I have just a curiosity and a question on the fact that the president named the Gülen movement as "terrorist", not just "opposition to something" but as "terrorist". What grounds would he have to do that, or is it simply his way of wiping out a movement by calling them all terrorists and putting them all in jail?

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: I'll go first.

It's basically a pretext to wipe out the main civic organization in Turkey, which was very powerful in many sectors of the society, including the media, civil society, and other segments of the society, and it was actually done long before the failed coup attempt.

It was quite ironic. The first case launched against the movement was based on a complaint filed by a Turkish al Qaeda group called Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, led by Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani. He was prosecuted back in 2009 and when the police raided their safe houses they found a cache of weapons. In a lot of the pictures the guy is actually praising Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda figures, so it was a crackdown and it was praised by the Erdogan government at the time, back in 2009. But after the movement fell out with Erdogan, after the corruption scandal in December 2013, one of the suspects undergoing trial in this al Qaeda case filed a complaint and the government tagged onto this complaint to accuse the movement of fabricating the charges, or defaming or discrediting a Turkish al Qaeda leader. That was back in 2014 and things got picked up from there.

After the failed coup attempt, which we still do not know who actually orchestrated, he immediately blamed the movement even though the failed coup attempt was still under way and he had no evidence at all in the initial hours. The prime minister of the government at the time, Binali Yildirim, admitted later that they didn't know actually who did it, but they just named him. So that was without any solid or direct evidence.

You can see that in the ongoing trials in Turkey, as well. There is nothing indicating that the movement was somehow involved as an organizational entity. There may have been some officers aligned with the movement who may have been involved in the failed coup attempt, but it wasn't an organizational scheme.

But as I said, it was just a pretext to wipe out the big dog on the block, so to speak, and all the others would fall into line if you go after the big boy.

● (1345)

Hon. Judy A. Sgro: How vocal are the opposition parties that will be in this upcoming autumn election?

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: Are you talking about the new opposition party or about others?

I think the opposition doesn't have much chance to challenge Erdogan, especially the main opposition party, which is in disarray. There are too many factions within the party. They don't have the media coverage, they don't have the grassroots organization, and they don't have the financial resources to be able to make a campaign and to reach out to the people, especially those in rural areas.

The start-up opposition party, which is called Iyi Party or Good Party, is run by a nationalist lady. She didn't have enough time to get this party off the ground and she doesn't have any financial resources or organizational capability. That's one of the reasons Erdogan called the snap polls, to not provide her with an opportunity to organize her party or for others to make any alliances before the election.

I don't see any chance of free and fair elections in the snap polls, because even if, let's say, the people voted for the opposition, at the end of the day it will be up to the election commission, which is comprised of the judges, to decide and certify the election results. All of the judges are in the pockets of the Erdogan government. If they do not comply with his request, they will be accused of terrorism charges and will be thrown into jail.

The bottom line is that the election commission that will be conducting the election and certifying the results is completely on the side of the government.

Hon. Judy A. Sgro: What can Canada do, or what would you like Canada to do?

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: The best we can do is to push for sending very strong, very robust international monitoring delegations into Turkey, either through the OSCE or the Council of Europe. It may be that other non-governmental officials, NGOs, may watch and monitor elections during the campaign period or during the election day when the vote is tallied up.

Canada should be able to mobilize its allies and friends to make sure that we have more robust monitoring, more people than we saw in the past election, to make sure that if the Turkish people somehow manage to vote against Erdogan in big numbers, then at least we have a chance to ensure that the votes are counted and certified correctly under the monitoring of international observers.

The Chair: Thank you. We'll now move to MP Hardcastle.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to ask Mr. Bozkurt and Ms. Yildiz each questions. I'm going to use up all of my time with allowing you to answer.

I'm going to ask you two questions right now so that you can think about your response. We'll start with Mr. Bozkurt.

I'd like to hear a little bit more about how Canada can reduce the risks that the Turkish diaspora takes when speaking out in other countries. The reason is that we know the Turkish diaspora is vulnerable. They are being extradited. They are being detained. They are being called out of other countries for political reasons because we have a system, with Interpol, that is vulnerable to this kind of abuse.

I'd like to hear you talk a little bit about that. That, I think, will take up all of my time. I'll just give you a little reminder so that we can let Ms. Yildiz come in then, Mr. Bozkurt.

Thank you.

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: We actually issued a report on the abuse of Interpol by the Turkish government. There were two significant cases. One is Swedish and the other is a German national, both with a Turkish background. They were detained in Spain. It created huge troubles in different capitals of Europe and it became a problem with Interpol. It is a very pressing concern for many people, including me. If you want to travel abroad, you may end up in a country where the Turkish government conveys an arrest warrant through Interpol and that government makes it possible or is amenable to executing that false warrant against you and other critics. That should be taken up with Interpol, because it's actually against the Interpol constitution. All political cases shouldn't be taken up with Interpol, because the system is based on going after real criminals, not political critics and dissidents. Unfortunately, the Erdogan government is abusing the system to create an intimidation campaign for people in the diaspora.

Another significant threat I see in the diaspora communities is that Erdogan's long arm is really operating within the diaspora groups, deepening the division, expanding the polarization, and they're using the pro-government people as spies against other critics, to harass them and issue threats. That is another challenge we face in the diaspora communities and we need the prosecutors and other authorities to actually come in and crack down on this harassment and intimidation campaign within the diaspora groups, just to make sure these critics who live in exile can live peacefully and they can still keep writing and speaking up. That is a very pressing issue for many exiled people.

● (1350)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Ms. Yildiz.

Ms. Arzu Yildiz: It is not the only problem. A very important problem is that if they investigate you, they take your passport, first, and not just yours but your husband's and your kids' as well. They will never let them go out anywhere. For this reason, people are in fear of the government system and torture. Everyone knows what happens in the Turkish prisons and the police offices.

If they want to leave Turkey, they try the illegal way. It is dangerous. Sometimes they die in the Maritsa River. Some families and also children have died in the Maritsa at the border of Greece and Turkey.

On the other hand, I want to say, there is no opposition party in Turkey. They do everything together, because their option is, if they don't, a lot of people are tortured or detained every morning. They wake up with the operation every morning. It is not regular things and not normal. However, I think in the background they agree with it. They do everything together.

Only one party, maybe Afghanistan, the Kurdish party, would oppose, but, for example, Selahattin Demirtas and the other chairman were detained, jailed. Others work together with Erdogan. They don't want to show their faces. They use the Erdogan face for all crime. If they don't let them, they can leave the parliament. Everything is finished there. They have no rule in the parliament.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Okay.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have time for one last short question. We do have some committee business and we need to go in camera at the end of this meeting.

I'll hand the floor over to MP Fragiskatos for a short question, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you; and thank you to the witnesses.

Mr. Bozkurt, I'm struggling to understand what the Gülen movement is all about. I'm certainly very concerned about the human rights abuses that have been perpetrated by the Erdogan government. However, is the Gülen movement simply a self-improvement organization, or does it harbour political interests and ambitions? I know they have a strong position in civil society, but there are also supporters of the Gülen movement in the police, the judiciary, and the military. Mr. Erdogan has used that to frame the Gülen movement, or Hizmet as it is otherwise known, as evidence that they pose a threat to the state. Is there anything to substantiate that?

● (1355)

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: We have so many cases that we can look up. There is no single evidence as far as I can see. I didn't find any. The only problem in this narrative is that we don't have an independent judicial force in Turkey. The prosecutors and the judges need to rely on the police force, which is managed by the government, a different branch of the government. They came up with a scheme. If the prosecutor ordered the police force to investigate, then the mandate lies with the judiciary, not with the government, not with the executive branch because we don't have an independent judiciary. They need to co-operate on investigating the cases.

The government picks up on that and says they see the police force and judges co-operating. That's the nature of the business. That is a major criticism from the European Union and for so many years they have asked the Turkish government to create an independent judicial force that can investigate different crimes. The Gülen movement is a completely volunteer-driven organization led by a man living in the States. I think he is 80 years old. He has never offered a political ambition. He never ran on a candidate ticket and he never established a party.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I hate to interrupt you, but it's an important point, the statement that he made in the late 1990s encouraging followers to get involved in politics, to take on the main arteries of the state. "Embed yourselves", I believe is what he said, or something to that effect. He then said that was a fabricated video statement that was released. So is there nothing to that statement at all? Were those not his words?

I'm struggling to understand Fethullah Gülen's ambitions. Is it simply about organizing a movement that seeks the self-improvement of Turks as individuals or is there something more? Is there political ambition there? It's hard for me to assess this.

The Chair: Can you answer that in one minute? We need to move on to committee business.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Abdullah Bozkurt: As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, the movement set up over 1,000 of the best performing schools in Turkey. The best and the brightest graduate from these school. They have every right to enter into any government institution based on their merits and their qualifications, of course. It was very natural because they are the top schools in Turkey, and many of them come from the school whether they're Gülenists or not. Many people in Turkey have nothing to do with the Gülen movement at all. They sent their kids, including some of the lawmakers from Erdogan's party. They wanted to get the best prospects for their children.

As for the call that was discussed many years ago, it was misquoted and it was fabricated. Actually, there was a case that went on for almost a decade. It ended in 2008 and Gülen was acquitted of these charges. However, it is rehashed and comes back whenever the politicians wanted to strike back at him.

The Chair: I'd like to thank both of our witnesses for their important testimony here today. I'm now going to suspend while we move in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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